

10. The Real Problem with Religion (2024)

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Biologists say that every species has its Achilles heel, a trait that, if it gets out of hand, can drive the species to extinction. I worry that in humans, that trait is religion.

Just consider the millions of people who have died bickering over religious differences, not to mention the thousands currently at risk for the same reasons. For centuries, protestants and Catholics, Sunnis and Shiites, and Sikhs and Hindus have been killing each other. Decapitation, burning at the stake, disemboweling, even extracting the beating heart from a living sacrifice have all been common practices, thanks to religion.

The religious ecosystem is a zero-sum game: every new Baptist means one less Catholic. Survival of a religion in this competitive system is achieved only by maximizing relative numbers of members. There are two ways to do this. One is to expand your own reproduction, which is why most religions ban contraception, abortion, homosexuality, and masturbation. The other way is to either convert or kill off your competition.

Religions not only seek to add new members, they also need to retain the ones they have. Nearly all invoke the three "F's" to do this. The first F is to put "Flags" on their members that will continually remind them to which religion they belong, as well as advertise to others how common this religion might be. Typical flags include specified clothing, constrained diets, distinctive haircuts, and in some cases, body marking or mutilation (e.g., circumcision). They may also include conspicuous activities such as morning prayers, segregation of the two sexes at events, and special ceremonies for life's transitions.

The second F is "Faith". Members are taught that they must believe the doctrines of their religion no matter what contrary information might be provided, say by science, or other religions. To ensure members are loyal in this way, they are told that they will be punished in Hell if they let their faith waver but enjoy Heavenly rewards if they are stalwart. Faith also has a built-in positive feedback loop: keeping the faith through tough times and surviving can be argued as evidence supporting the faith.

The third F is "Force". At many times in human history, a dominant religion has used physical force to ensure that everyone within their grasp adheres to their rules and beliefs. Punishment for disloyalty can range from social isolation to dismemberment and death.

It is tempting to chalk up religious conflict as just another example of human "tribalism". History is full of examples of different groups fighting over some resource or territory. But history also shows that such conflicts can lead to eventual melding of the competing groups. Cultural practices such as agriculture have practical advantages and even a Mongol horde that favors cooking their steaks under their horse's saddles can eventually learn to raise crops.

But the clash of religions is less amenable to melding. There are certainly examples where this has occurred. But at the root of most religions is a belief in something like a god, heaven, or virgin birth, which cannot be proved, one way or the other. When two religions have conflicting core beliefs that are not provable or disprovable, it is usually impossible to meld them. Adherents of each religion will remain convinced that they are right and the other is wrong.

Ideally, two religions might agree to tolerate each other. But the world does not have many examples where this was a long-term stable solution. For its first 200 years, the United States insisted on freedom of religion, which technically meant tolerance of different religions. This principle is currently under attack by Christian evangelicals, who envision a religious theocracy for the country based on their religion, and not the others. The Taliban in Afghanistan, the current leadership in India favoring Hinduism, and the religious councils running Iran all have similar goals. Eventually, the existence of a contrary religion is seen as a threat: the two religions cannot both be right, and there is no peaceful way to settle it.

Science deals with many of the same questions that religion seeks to answer: where did we come from, where are we going, why do things happen the way they do, and so on. The difference, and it is a big one, is that scientists routinely list alternative explanations for a given phenomenon and then do experiments to either exclude or verify the alternatives. Although scientists have occasionally come to blows defending their favorite hypotheses, in the end, it is the experiment that resolves the question. Sometimes, as with Einstein's theory of relativity or the existence of the Higgs boson, it can take decades to determine whether a given hypothesis can be verified and alternatives excluded. But that is what scientists do. And if someone doubts the outcome, they can always redo the experiment or come up with a different perhaps more discriminating one.

Unfortunately, there are no parallels in religion. In fact, one might argue that the real problem with religion is that it is *not* a science! I say this despite the many "scientific" books coming out of the evangelical movement purporting to "debunk" modern geological dating, discount the relevance of the 30-some hominin fossils found to date, prove that Noah's Ark really existed, etc. Yielding to pressure by religious relatives, I have read a number of these and was astounded at their twisting of the data, misinterpretations, and outright falsehoods. I am sure there are scientists who are strongly religious, and willing to take a side, but reviewing those books on topics in which I am reasonably well versed, I was not convinced. To be fair, my evangelical relatives remain unconvinced that they are carrying genes from a long-ago ancestor's tryst with a member of another closely related hominin species. The difference: I believe in data-driven science, whereas they believe in faith-based religion.

If not science, where do most religions come from? Many religions rely on a sacred text that was reportedly dictated by God or written down after supernatural events occurred. But only in rare circumstances can one verify that those events actually happened, much less that they happened in the way that the text claims. And when someone claims that God appeared to them in an epiphany, it is a sample size of "one" and there is no way to replicate this experiment.

Other religious doctrines arise through the sanctification of pre-existing customs. For example, once humans have an economy based on a defensible resource, such as arable land or herds of domestic animals, adjacent groups will attempt to take over each other's property. Since men are

traditionally the most effective warriors, male inheritance becomes the norm in such societies. And given the uncertainty of paternity in most human populations, male inheritance often leads to serious constraints on the freedom, activities, and even bodily integrity of their women.

For example, Middle Eastern cultures, which were traditionally pastoralist, had many constraints on women long before Islam or Judaism made them scriptural law. The blaming of "original sin" on women in the Bible's Genesis surely reflects and even justifies such constraints.

Although religion has properties that go beyond tribalism, it often exploits tribalistic tendencies that are present in most people: the willingness to follow a charismatic and persuasive leader, the urge to defend members of your group when challenged by another group, and the reinforcing camaraderie and fellowship experienced when sharing similar beliefs. To be fair, sometimes the same tribalism occurs in science. We are all human and there is no doubt that human tribalism goes back a long way in our evolution. But I think you will find that in the end, most scientists, however reluctantly, will give up on a favored notion when presented with serious evidence. This does not happen often with religion, and it continues to be a major trigger for violence and bigotry throughout the world.

Let us hope it will not be our Achilles' heel.

These and related issues are discussed in far greater detail by Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Sam Harris (*Letter to a Christian Nation*), and Christopher Hitchens (*God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*), among others.